

‘Keep the forest’: South Surrey cemetery expansion plans raise opposition

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Body

A crowd estimated to number 150-plus packed the Turnbull Gallery at South Surrey Recreation & Arts Centre recently to learn more about expansion plans proposed for Sunnyside Lawn Cemetery.

The city is mulling how best to increase capacity at the 14850 28 Ave. burial ground and has begun putting together a master plan to that effect. Officials contend an additional five acres will be needed at Sunnyside Lawn over the next 25 years and that the cemetery is the only one among the three city-operated facilities with room to expand.

But the proposal is not sitting well with area residents. Some even protested outside the rec centre with signs during the open house, held Nov. 20. Many with concerns are stewards of Sunnyside Acres Urban Forest, home to a plethora of mature second-growth trees, as well as a stretch of the heritage Semiahmoo Trail.

Sunnyside Acres Heritage Society is one of four local organizations collaborating to boost community awareness of the proposal, and encouraging the public to have their say.

The society also wants the city to “honour their own recommendations in their Biodiversity Conservation Strategy document that recommends we should preserve the remaining high-quality habitats.”

In a email distributed following the open house, SAHS president Bram Klijsen told recipients the turnout “sent a strong message opposing the cemetery expansion and its impact on our 100-year-old forest.”

He also criticized the city for sharing “limited factual information beyond their intention not to clear-cut the forest.”

“Their posters outlined vague project goals and included an ‘opportunity diagram’ that upset many attendees,” he writes.

The boards – available to view on the city’s website – note expansion strategies being considered include green burial areas; infilling redundant cemetery driveways as needed; and providing a range of less land-intensive options, such as cremation gardens.

Comments penned on brightly coloured sticky notes that blanketed the “Questions and Comments” display board Nov. 20 ranged from outright opposition to reluctant support.

“Hard no! to expansion,” reads one.

“Better to have forest memorials than subdivisions,” reads another.

Klijsen told Peace Arch News the city’s discussion would be better-framed around the value society places on preserving the forest for generations to come.

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“I am not opposed to cemeteries, but the cemetery expansion should not come at the cost of an irreplaceable forest that has quietly been the lungs of our community for the last century,” Klijsen said by email.

He also questioned the assertion that the city lacks land elsewhere for additional cemetery space.

In an emailed statement, Surrey parks, recreation and culture officials said Thursday (Nov. 28) that there is “no suitable land in the City’s inventory for a new cemetery and further acquisition of land is not currently feasible.”

Sunnyside Lawn was set aside as a cemetery in 1951, they noted.

At the open house, one sticky-note commenter appealed for use of the cemetery to be restricted to Surrey residents only – an aspect that was also highlighted in a recent letter to Mayor Brenda Locke and council shared with PAN by area resident Danish Butt.

Dated Nov. 19, Butt’s letter questions a “longstanding arrangement” the city has with the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction and the Public Guardian and Trustee to use Surrey cemeteries for ministry-funded burials and cremations.

It means “the entire Metro Vancouver and Fraser Valley Regional Districts are sending all their provincially funded burials and cremations to our Surrey owned and operated municipal cemeteries,” Butt writes.

Compounding the issue, he continues, is that it’s being done because the city has offered the lowest price in the region for these services.

He included a comparison of the city’s pricing to that charged in Maple Ridge, Delta, Coquitlam and Abbotsford to support the assertion. “We have become a dumping ground for burials and cremations, whereas all other municipalities restrict the use of their cemetery lands by imposing premium pricing for non-residents,” Butt stated.

Accepting Public Guardian burials from throughout the region only further depletes the already limited inventory, the letter continues. “Had we not taken on these practices in the past, we inevitably would not need to be expanding the Sunnyside Cemetery and cutting down all those trees in the neighbourhood.”

While parks officials confirmed that ministry-and Public Guardian-funded burials are accepted at Surrey cemeteries, “the City does not track if these sales are for residents or non-residents.”

Butt said no one who attended the open house supported cutting into the urban forest to expand the cemetery.

Area resident Ross Scott described clearing the forest for more burial room as “not reconciliation nor environmentally friendly.”

“I live on the trail and the loss of urban habitat is disturbing,” Scott told PAN by email.

“The City of Surrey should get out of the funeral plot business, and by their own admission it doesn’t make money for anyone.”

An online survey hosted by the city to gather further feedback on the proposal closes Dec. 5. Visit surrey.ca/sunnysidecemetery.

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